

PRESS RELEASE

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PLANNING IN MADISON COUNTY: WHERE HAVE WE BEEN? WHERE ARE WE GOING?

[Part 1 of a two-part series on land use planning in Madison County]

2006 has been a busy year, in terms of planning for the future of Madison County. The Madison County Commissioners recently adopted revised subdivision regulations and review fees, a Madison County Housing Plan, and a Madison County Growth Policy. These last two documents are amendments to the 1999 Madison County Comprehensive Plan. Still in the works is a Madison Valley Growth Management Action Plan, which would also amend the 1999 Madison County Comprehensive Plan.

Attention to planning and land use regulations in Madison County is nothing new. In fact, the State of Montana and Madison County both have a long history of planning activity. Here's an overview:

1953. The Montana Legislature authorizes counties to adopt landowner-initiated zoning (Zoning regulates land use and development).

1957. The Montana Legislature authorizes creation of planning board and comprehensive plans (A planning board advises the local government on issues of growth and change. A comprehensive plan is an advisory document used to guide local government decisions about growth and change).

1963. The Montana Legislature authorizes county-initiated zoning.

1972. The Madison County Commissioners establish a Planning Board, the first county to do so in the State of Montana.

1973. The Montana Legislature passes the Subdivision and Platting Act to regulate the division of land. The Madison County Commissioners retain a planning consultant to assist them and the County Planning Board. They adopt the first Madison County Comprehensive Plan. This plan recommends countywide zoning and subdivision regulations. Subdivision regulations are cited as the first priority, and subsequently adopted.

1988. The Madison County Commissioners update the Comprehensive Plan, and include a Madison Valley Plan. This planning document discusses the benefits of zoning and suggests that zoning be considered on a neighborhood-specific basis.

1993 and 1995. Madison County revises its subdivision regulations. Building setbacks along the rivers are applied to new subdivisions.

1999. The Madison County Commissioners again update the Comprehensive Plan. This plan encourages neighborhood planning and landowner-initiated zoning. It also recommends the appointment of citizen task forces to develop zoning proposals for river corridor protection. It further recommends zoning of public lands. The Plan eliminates the Madison Valley Plan's map of recommended land uses and urges a citizen-based effort to update the guidance for future decisions about growth in the Madison Valley. The Plan calls for an ongoing County planning program, and a full-time planner is hired.

Later in 1999, the Montana Legislature adopts the “growth policy” law. This law requires a comprehensive plan to include a specific list of elements, if the plan is to be used as a guide in: (1) developing local subdivision regulations; (2) reviewing subdivision proposals; and/or (3) County-initiated zoning.

2000. Madison County revamps its subdivision regulations. Among the changes is the offering of an “expedited review” incentive, for small subdivision proposals that pertain to land covered by a current neighborhood plan.

2003. The Montana Legislature makes clear that a growth policy cannot be the sole basis for denying or conditionally approving a subdivision application. The Legislature creates several development incentives, available to counties that have adopted zoning. These incentives include: (1) exemption of condominium proposals from subdivision review; and (2) exemption of subdivision applications from the environmental assessment requirement.

Also in 2003, Madison County adopts the Big Hole Land Use Plan, a citizen-initiated neighborhood plan, as an amendment to the 1999 Madison County Comprehensive Plan.

2004. Madison County adopts a Big Hole River setback ordinance to manage new construction along the river.

2005. The Montana Legislature enacts numerous changes to the local subdivision application and review process. Among the changes are: (1) water and sanitation information must be submitted with the subdivision application; (2) local planning staff must approve a subdivision application for completeness and sufficiency, before it can be accepted for review; and (3) the local governing body must document the legal basis for its subdivision decisions.

In addition to this State and County-level activity, the towns of Ennis, Sheridan, Twin Bridges, and Virginia City have planned for future growth and development over the years. Each community has an adopted Growth Policy. Both Ennis and Virginia City have a Planning Board, and zoning regulations.

Madison County’s history of planning, subdivision review, and consideration of zoning continues to evolve. Each step occurs only as the result of an extensive public process of information gathering-and-sharing, and community discussion. Implementation of existing plans is ongoing, with many tools available to accomplish the vision and goals stated in the plans.

As mentioned earlier, one planning document remains in the works. This is the Madison Valley Growth Management Action Plan, a product of the citizen-led Madison Growth Solutions process. The draft plan recommends a package of incentives, regulations, and education, as tools for managing future growth in the Madison Valley. In response to expressed concerns over the draft plan’s recommendation that county-initiated zoning be adopted for the Madison Valley, coordinators of the Madison Growth Solutions process last month asked County officials to postpone action on the plan. The Commissioners agreed, allowing time for continued community dialogue and potential plan revision.

Watch for the upcoming Part 2 article, “**Planning in Madison County: What Can It Do for Us? What Can It Do to Us?**” For more information, contact the Madison County Planning Office, at (406) 843-5250. For easy access to County plans and subdivision regulations, check out the County website, at www.madison.mt.gov.